REDUCING INFLOW INTO VETERAN HOMELESSNESS

Learnings from a pilot in four Built for Zero communities

Built For Zero.
COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic — and the wave of housing instability that is crashing over the United States as a result — makes it increasingly important to understand solutions for inflow[1] into homelessness. How do communities understand who is most at risk of experiencing homelessness? What systems and sectors need to share accountability for those who are most at risk? How do we direct interventions to those who are most housing insecure? How do we know if those interventions are effective in stabilizing people in their homes?

Reducing inflow into homelessness demands that society moves beyond managing the crisis of homelessness. It requires other sectors outside the homelessness response system to take responsibility for stabilizing people most at risk of homelessness. And since Black and Indigenous people experience homelessness at disproportionately higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups, addressing inflow requires looking at racism and racial inequity in the multiple systems that push people on a pathway towards homelessness.

Executed from October 2018 to October 2019, the Veteran Inflow Pilot was Built for Zero's first project dedicated solely to the question of what it would take to reduce inflow into veteran homelessness. Though we know that the world has since dramatically changed due to COVID-19, we understood then and still believe that most, if not all, communities, cannot reliably and sustainably end veteran homelessness without tackling inflow. If more veterans are entering into an experience homelessness than are exiting an experience of homelessness, it becomes exceedingly difficult for a community to achieve functional zero[2], a dynamic measure for ending homelessness for a population. The Built for Zero team designed and implemented this pilot project to explore these questions and help communities work towards reducing inflow into veteran homelessness.

In Phase I of this project, Community Solutions' Built for Zero team engaged communities to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative information about veterans' pathways into homelessness in an effort to identify specific interventions that could be tested to disrupt the flow of people into homelessness. These communities included Detroit, MI; Ann Arbor/Washtenaw County, MI; Fresno, CA; and Riverside City and County, CA.[3] Each agreed to share administrative data from their Homelessness Management Information Systems[4] (HMIS) and worked with the Built for Zero team to connect with and interview 20 veterans in each community about their pathways into homelessness. By centering the experience of veterans that access the homelessness response system, Built for Zero and local community teams hoped to identify areas

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[1] Community Solutions defines inflow into homelessness as anyone who becomes literally homeless. This includes people who are new to homelessness for the first time, people who return to homelessness from being previously housed and people who reappeared to the system after having not been seen for a designated period of time.

[2] Functional Zero for veteran homelessness is a standard developed by Community Solutions that indicates that fewer veterans are experiencing homelessness than can be housed in a month.

[3] Due to changes in leadership, Riverside City and County did not participate in Phase II of the Veteran Inflow Project. They did complete Phase I by providing quantitative data to the Built for Zero team and facilitating the process of having Built for Zero staff interview veterans experiencing homelessness.

[4] HMIS is a data system used to collect and store client-level data about housing and services delivered to homeless individuals, families and people at risk of experiencing homelessness.

for improvement in service delivery that would support stabilization in housing for veterans. Interviews focused on finding opportunities to close the gap between upstream systems (healthcare, foster care, criminal justice, etc.) and the homeless serving system for veterans.

Phase II intended to provide coaching and support to the participating communities as they planned for and implemented improvement projects using the quantitative and qualitative information collected and analyzed during Phase I. The Built for Zero team of Improvement Advisors, together with communities, were charged with identifying improvement projects to be tested and determining if they were successful in driving inflow reductions for veterans.

Ultimately, no community achieved inflow reductions during this pilot project that were tied to the implementation of one of the inflow specific improvement projects. However, this work unearthed key shared insights for the participating communities and the Built for Zero team. These learnings were instrumental in shaping our understanding of what it would actually take to reduce inflow into homelessness for veterans and other populations experiencing homelessness.

The Built for Zero team has distilled these learnings into a strategy for inflow reduction, which is a cornerstone of Built for Zero's Strategic Plan for the next five years. The elements of this strategy are detailed in the subsequent sections of this document.

Project Design

The Built for Zero team designed a multi-pronged, two-phase project around veteran inflow into homelessness. The goal of this project was to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data to generate community-specific improvement projects to be tested to reduce inflow into veteran homelessness. The Built for Zero team aimed for three of the participating communities to be on track for a shift in their veteran by-name list[5] inflow numbers during an Action Cycle from March 2019 to October 2019. In order to be on track for a shift, communities would need to work so that the number of veterans becoming homeless month over month decreased for three consecutive months. An Action Cycle is a six-month phase of work in which communities are supported by the Built for Zero Improvement Advisors to test, evaluate, and make changes to their systems.

Phase I of this project included working with communities to conduct a systems-level assessment to determine the landscape around veteran inflow into homelessness in each community. The systems assessment was comprised of a mixed methods approach:

1. Communities provided de-identified administrative data from their HMIS systems to understand high-level trends around inflow into veteran homelessness over a one-year period from June 1, 2017, to July 1, 2018.
2. Communities supported Built for Zero staff in identifying 100 veterans across the sites to participate in "life course" interviews. Veterans that were newly experiencing homelessness spoke with Built for Zero about their life experiences, specifically their pathways into homelessness, and what services and systems (within and outside of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]) they interacted with throughout their lives. The interviews were anonymous, and veterans were paid $50 for their time.
3. The Built for Zero team analyzed the qualitative information in the context of the HMIS administrative data to generate community-specific "Improvement Project Playbooks" that shared overall findings from the quantitative and qualitative data and pointed to specific interventions that communities could test in service of understanding their efficacy around reducing inflow into veteran homelessness.

Phase II of this project began in March 2019 with a kickoff at the Built for Zero Learning Session in Detroit. During a half-day session, communities reviewed their Improvement Project Playbooks, began to refine the improvement project suggestions included in the playbooks, and planned tests of change that suited their local context with an eye on driving inflow reductions for veterans.

Built for Zero Improvement Advisors (sometimes referred to as community coaches) would then coach communities through the implementation of these Improvement Projects in a manner consistent with the general improvement coaching provided to communities through the Built for Zero Collaborative[6].

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[5] A by-name list is a real-time, person specific list of veterans experiencing homelessness in a community.
[6] The Built for Zero Collaborative is a network of more than 80 communities in the United States working to end homelessness across multiple populations.

Inflow Pilot Plans and Activities

The goal of the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project was to support the participating communities in identifying, shaping, and implementing improvement projects that would generate measurable reductions of inflow into veteran homelessness.

While communities did not hit our threshold of measurable reductions in inflow, the work of the communities in this pilot project revealed numerous important findings that we believe are critical for inflow work within the Built for Zero network and more broadly. These include:

1. Prioritizing work on inflow into homelessness and building will across systems to focus on inflow reductions in partnership between the homelessness response system and other adjacent/upstream sectors within a community.
2. Gaining a deeper understanding of the local drivers of inflow in each community.
3. Beginning to create and test upstream partnerships to build teams that are accountable for reducing inflow into homelessness. The target upstream partners must intentionally include programs and systems that are outside of the homelessness response system.
4. Adopting a Quality Improvement framework to conduct inflow work, including collecting quality, reliable, and up-to-date data that makes visible the number of people entering into homelessness. This also pertains to the work of connecting the aforementioned upstream systems to a community's by-name list data to understand if interventions, like those delivered through homelessness prevention and diversion programs, are effective in stabilizing people in their homes.

Additionally, the majority of the communities that participated in Phase II of the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project completed exploratory work for reducing inflow in communities. Though communities hit roadblocks that prevented fully implementing these changes, the ideas generated, projects developed, and steps taken yielded valuable insights into barriers and opportunities for future systems improvement. Examples of these improvement project ideas that communities discussed and planned for are summarized in the table below.

	COMMUNITY 1	COMMUNITY 2	COMMUNITY 3
IDEAS	1. Match data from VA Substance Use Treatment programs to the by-name list to determine how many veterans inflowed to homelessness. 2. Partner with a local stakeholder outside of the homelessness response system to gather data on vulnerable veteran households to connect them to resources to stabilize housing.	1. Increase coordination between the Substance Use Disorder Program and Homeless Veteran Services to prevent discharges to unsheltered homelessness.	1. Match data from Veteran Treatment Court to the by-name list to determine how many veterans entered into homelessness. 2. Develop a campaign to landlords to promote support services for veterans at risk of losing housing. 3. Identify veterans earlier in the Coordinated Entry process.
ACTION	• Projects were put on hold until new staff was hired.	• Developed biweekly orientation to Homeless Veterans in Substance Use Disorder Program to prevent discharges to homelessness.	• These projects were not implemented with Built For Zero Improvement Advisors. • Community underwent staffing shifts (lead on family leave) and Built For Zero Improvement Advisor and coaching changes.

Over the course of the Action Cycle, communities identified impediments to implementing these improvement projects. These included:

1. The time investment needed to truly create new partnerships outside of the homelessness response system,
2. Data sharing policies that made sharing data between stakeholders difficult,
3. Staffing changes (both on local teams and within Built for Zero) that disrupted continuity of the work, and
4. Many competing local priorities that made it a challenge to focus on inflow work.

Nonetheless, at the end of the Action Cycle, some of the participating communities shared that this project did help lay a foundation for continuing to work on inflow, in particular around improving inflow data quality, mapping prevention systems, and exploring data sharing with prevention and diversion programs to understand the impact on inflow into homelessness.

And through a partnership with the Urban Institute, we were able to interview communities about their plans and activities during the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project. While improvement coaching was happening, the Urban Institute conducted qualitative interviews with different providers participating in the pilot. These interviews occurred at both the beginning and end of the Action Cycle. For the first wave of interviews, the Urban Institute engaged someone from the local community improvement team and someone from the local VA Medical Center (VAMC), who is also a part of the community improvement team, to explore a series of questions. The interviews asked about factors contributing to veteran inflow, current partnerships in participating communities, what activities communities were currently engaging in and planning to engage in around reducing inflow into veteran homelessness, and how communities were planning to measure whether or not the inflow-related improvement projects were successful in achieving the desired outcome of the project. For the second wave of interviews, the Urban team engaged a Built for Zero staff person — an Improvement Advisor — for each of the communities, as well as the community leads, to determine how Pilot activities had been developing, and reflections on challenges and success of the Pilot.

The work of the communities that participated in Phase II unearthed recommendations that are outlined in the Urban Institute's report for the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project. The project also helped the Built for Zero team home in on critical learnings and recommendations that are a focal point in Community Solutions' Strategic Plan for the next five years.

These learnings influenced the development of Built for Zero's strategy for supporting communities to make measurable inflow reductions. Without engaging in the dedicated inflow work with communities, we would not have uncovered the following pillars of the emerging Built for Zero Inflow strategy:

1. **Cross-sector accountability structure for reducing inflow into homelessness.**
   We are explicitly calling out the need for a cross-sector accountability structure to bear responsibility for reducing inflow into homelessness. This structure will need to include people from the homelessness response system, but it should sit adjacent to this system. The homelessness response system responds to crises and cannot be solely responsible for stabilizing people in housing, especially when the homelessness response system is accountable for work that drives outflow, helping people exit their experience of homelessness into safe and appropriate permanent housing. Communities in the Veteran Inflow Project expressed the tension of these competing priorities, and often felt as though focusing on inflow reduction meant taking time away from working with people who were currently experiencing homelessness in their communities.

2. **Policy and advocacy work that creates an environment within which inflow reductions are possible.** Policy change and advocacy are critical components of creating a more fertile environment for reducing inflow into homelessness. In a local context, this could look like advocating for changes in data-sharing policies between sectors, lobbying local governments for policies that center tenant protection, and creating policy for more

affordable housing within communities to name a few. Built for Zero would like to leverage our own position and resources to help communities create policy agendas and more enabling conditions for reducing the number of people that become homeless. National stakeholders also have a role to play in advocating for policy at the federal level, and we are seeking to engage a multi-sector set of national players to advance a federal policy agenda that would clear the path for communities to achieve inflow reduction. We believe that both local and national policy work needs to rectify the harm done to communities that have been most impacted by our country's history and legacy of racist and oppressive systems. Built for Zero will be working to co-create a policy agenda with local and national stakeholders, including people with lived experience of homelessness, to call for changes in policies that would enable inflow reductions in communities.

3. **Funding streams specific to inflow reduction work.** Communities that participated in the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project discussed the tension between directing funds within the homelessness response system towards reducing inflow, which cannibalizes resources that could be used to drive increases in the number of people exiting homelessness. The Built for Zero team recognizes a need for identifying resources that are specifically designated for inflow reduction. On a local level, paid positions that are responsible for the outcome of inflow reduction need to be created. There need to be coordinated, accountable funding streams that support stabilizing renters in their homes as well as ensuring that people who have previously experienced homelessness do not return to homelessness, among other interventions. Built for Zero also believes that there is a role for national stakeholders to play here as well, advocating for funding streams at the federal level that will support this work in local communities, like the creation of tenant-based rental assistance programs and funding for supportive services across multiple sectors that serve to provide not only financial assistance to prevent evictions but services that address any potential underlying factors that may render someone unable to pay their rent or sustain their housing.

4. **Good data on inflow into literal homelessness to help identify who is most at risk of experiencing homelessness and target interventions to stabilize people in housing.** A community needs to have visibility into the number of people who are entering into literal homelessness in as close to real time as possible. Communities that participated in the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project were able to confidently report the number of veterans entering into homelessness on a month-over-month basis. In order to work on inflow reductions, all communities will similarly need to know who is entering into homelessness. Additionally, a community will need to be able to understand pathways into homelessness and to work with upstream systems to share data so that people whom our housing systems are failing can be identified before they enter into an experience of homelessness. This includes being able to track the outcomes of prevention, emergency housing assistance, and diversion programs and resources; data collection and sharing around discharge planning and at any system touchpoint in which an individual indicates they do not have safe and stable housing; and advocating for prevention resources and supportive services for veterans with a homeless history, particularly youth homelessness. Good data on inflow into literal

homelessness also means listening to and acting on qualitative information shared by people with lived expertise of housing instability and homelessness.

5. **A dedicated system for sharing and codifying learnings across communities and the broader Built for Zero network.** The Built for Zero team has always believed in the power of communities in our network coming together. The Veteran Inflow Pilot Project went deep with participating communities to try to understand the dynamics of inflow into homelessness and identify interventions that stem the tide of people who end up in the homelessness response system.

   We also believe that the Built for Zero team, our network of communities and the homelessness/adjacent sectors greatly benefit from identifying and documenting bright spots, common challenges, and thoughtfully planning for scaling proven solutions.

Built for Zero is committed to helping communities create a lasting end to homelessness that leaves no one behind. To date, numerous communities have demonstrated that it is possible to create data-driven, coordinated homeless service systems capable of driving population-level reductions. Many have reached functional zero, proving it is possible to create a reality where the number of veterans experiencing homelessness does not exceed the number of individuals that can be housed in a month. We are interested in continuing to support a future where this reality is the norm, not the exception, and one that can be sustained.

In order to realize this, Built for Zero will work to achieve replicable models that enable communities to prevent inflow into homelessness. Through January 2025, this focus on inflow will be integrated across all areas of our work — from our work with large cities in the Built for Zero Collaborative focused on ending veteran homelessness, to our work with communities working to end homelessness for every subpopulation. We are grateful to continue building upon and sharing the critical insights gained through the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project and from all those who participated.

Acknowledgements

As with all work to end homelessness, no single actor can do it alone. This ethos was exemplified in the Veteran Inflow Pilot Project, and we would like to thank every person and organization that made this work possible.

Thank you to The Home Depot Foundation for their generous support of this project and for their commitment to ending veteran homelessness. We are honored to partner with The Home Depot Foundation to help ensure every veteran has a place to call home.

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Thank you to the Built for Zero staff that made this project possible. From supporting its development, to conducting interviews and steadfastly analyzing community-level data, you have shown an eagerness to work in a new way with grace, clear eyes, and a determined focus to support the work of ending veteran homelessness.

And thank you to all the veterans that spoke to us openly and honestly about their lives. This project would not have been possible without the courageous voices of the 100 veterans that took the time to sit down with the Built for Zero team. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their service to this country and their active and selfless role to support the work of ending homelessness for other veterans by sharing their experiences with us.

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